

## **Murray turns up the heat over decision to scrap asbestos alert**

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WASHINGTON -- Sen. Patty Murray yesterday sought to intensify pressure on the White House and federal regulators to explain why a nationwide effort to alert people about the dangers of asbestos was withdrawn.

In separate letters to Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Christy Todd Whitman and John Graham, a senior official in the Office of Management and Budget, Murray, D-Wash., asked for documentation to support the government's decision last year not to issue a warning about widely available insulation laced with asbestos.

At issue is insulation sold under the name Zonolite that contains trace amounts of asbestos. The insulation was mined and sold by W.R. Grace & Co., and according to EPA material could be in 15 million to 35 million buildings.

According to Murray and published reports, the EPA finished work last spring on a campaign to warn people about the dangers of asbestos-tainted insulation that was produced from a mine operated by Grace in Libby, Mont.

The EPA eventually declared that operation a Superfund site, a candidate for cleanup because

it poses a risk to human health or the environment. The public warning, however, was never made. Grace has insisted that the insulation posed no health threat.

At least 200 men and women from Libby have died from diseases caused by exposure to asbestos-tainted vermiculite mined from Libby, and hundreds more are sick. The asbestos levels in the town, however, are far higher than the level found in the insulation.

In the letter to Whitman, Murray and 10 other congressional Democrats ask for a wide array of information, including all correspondence with OMB and Grace. The five-page letter, which a Murray aide likened to a subpoena, also asks if the EPA calculated "the level of exposure to asbestos" from products mined from Libby and sold across the country.

EPA officials did not respond to requests for comment last night, but an agency spokesman said last week a nationwide campaign to educate people about the dangers of Zonolite would be unveiled in six weeks.

OMB officials referred all questions to the EPA.

In the letter to Graham, Murray said she is "concerned that the federal government is not doing enough to warn homeowners and workers nationwide about risks from products made with the vermiculite once mined there."

"In particular," she wrote, "we want to understand OMB's role in EPA's decision to pull back from issuing a public warning to consumers and workers about the risks of Zonolite insulation, which was produced from vermiculite mined in Libby and is contaminated with asbestos."

Others signing the letters were Sens. Patrick Leahy of Vermont; Maria Cantwell of Washington; Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York; Jim Jeffords of Vermont, and Mark Dayton of Minnesota; and Reps. Henry Waxman of California; Jan Schakowsky of Illinois; Betty McCollum of Minnesota; Jerold Nadler of New York, and Sherrod Brown of Ohio.